

Brian Views Destruction in Gaza – Calls for Immediate Relief and Change in Policy (February 19, 2009)

Washington, D.C. - Two members of Congress, Brian Baird (D-WA-03), and Keith Ellison, (D-MN-05), visited Gaza on Thursday to view firsthand the destruction from recent Israeli air and ground attacks and to meet with international and local relief agencies. This visit, which did not have the official sanction of the Obama Administration, is the first time anyone from the U.S. government has entered Gaza in more than three years.

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Prior to Gaza, both Congressmen met with the chief negotiator of the Palestinian Authority, Dr. Saeb Erekat, as well as with Dr. Riad Malki Foreign Minister of the Palestinian Authority. On Friday, Baird and Ellison will tour the Israeli towns of Sderot and Ashkelon, which have been the target of numerous rockets before and throughout the recent attacks launched from within the Gaza strip.

"Staff from the U.S. State Department advised us of security concerns for our own safety, and we are well aware of the sensitive political issues involved in this visit," said both Congressmen in an official release.

"We believe it is important to be here to see what happened for ourselves, to meet with people who have been affected, and to express our concern and support," said Congressman Baird.

"We also want to better understand what can and must be done to recover from the destruction, address the underlying issues, and work toward a lasting, just and peaceful resolution," added Congressman Ellison.

After spending the day visiting various locations within Gaza and meeting with civilians and relief workers, Baird and Ellison were deeply affected by what they had seen and heard.

"The stories about the children affected me the most," said Ellison.
 "No parent, or anyone who cares for kids, can remain unmoved by what Brian and I saw here."

"The amount of physical destruction and the depth of human suffering here is staggering" said Baird, "Entire neighborhoods have been destroyed, schools completely leveled, fundamental water, sewer, and electricity facilities hit and relief agencies heavily damaged. The personal stories of children being killed in their homes or schools, entire families wiped out, and relief workers prevented from evacuating the wounded are heart wrenching - what went on here, and what is continuing to go on, is shocking and troubling beyond words."

Inquiring about the status of relief efforts, the Congressmen learned that some aid material has been allowed in since the intensity of the attacks lessened a month ago, but much is still being blocked by the Israeli defense forces. Examples of aid that has been banned by the Israeli Government include: lentils, macaroni, tomato paste, lentils and other food. Basic building materials, generator fuel and parts to repair damaged water treatment equipment have also been kept out.

"If this had happened in our own country, there would be national outrage and an appeal for urgent assistance. We are glad that the Obama administration acted quickly to send much needed funding for this effort but the arbitrary and unreasonable Israeli limitations on food and repair essentials is unacceptable and indefensible. People, innocent children, women and non-combatants, are going without water, food and sanitation, while the things they so desperately need are sitting in trucks at the border, being denied permission to go in" said Baird and Ellison.

The Congressmen's concerns about treatment of Palestinians were not limited to Gaza. They also visited Palestinian hospitals that treat patients from East Jerusalem and the West Bank. There they met with doctors, nurses and hospital directors who described how official Israeli policies and restricted border checkpoints make it exceedingly difficult and expensive for patients, nurses, medical technicians, and other essential personnel to reach the hospital to receive or provide care.

"It's hard for anyone in our country to imagine how it must feel to have a sick child who needs urgent care or is receiving chemotherapy or dialysis, then be forced to take a needlessly lengthy route, walk rather than drive, and wait in lines as long as two hours simply to get to the hospital. As a health care professional myself, I found this profoundly troubling, no, actually it's beyond that, it is outrageous," said Baird.

Responding to this and other issues the Congressman emphasized that fundamental changes and solutions are needed beyond the immediate challenges in Gaza.

"The first and most urgent priority must be helping the people in Gaza. At the same time, the rocket attacks against Israeli cities must stop immediately. Just as the people of Gaza should not be subject to what they have experienced the Israeli civilians should not have to live in fear of constant and indiscriminate rocketing. The entire region and the international community must recommit itself to making the difficult but necessary changes to bring about lasting and just peace and security for the region. President Obama has made important and encouraging initiatives, now it is up to leaders and citizens here to move forward toward that shared goal"

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